1968 in west central Europe

I was in West Germany and Switzerland during the 'May events' and the Prague Spring, and in August I was on what would now be called an internship in Basel. As I arrived in the office Dr Goldstein announced in an unusually solemn tone: 'Die Russen sind einmarschiert'. I remember pointlessly telephoning the British embassy as though it might have anything to say which was not already in the local papers; perhaps it was a touch of homesickness after eight months abroad, and there was a certain amount of discussion about whether there might be a serious response from the West. One of my colleagues was an emigrant from Czechoslovakia, another from Hungary, but I do not recall details of a conversation about the invasion, unlike the earlier occasion when the Czech, whom I had not previously heard speaking English, burst in to say 'Bobby Kennedy's been shot'.

I must have followed the subsequent events in Czechoslovakia in the papers, but I do not recall anything else from that time. My job ended at the end of the month and I travelled for another few weeks before taking up my university place at Oxford. There, the aftermath of May 1968 continued (Bhambra and Demir 2009), with demonstrations against the US war in Vietnam and more local concerns such as a visit to Oxford by the racist Conservative politician Enoch Powell. I considered myself a Marxist but without any attachment except participation in the broadly-based, if slightly pretentiously named, 'Oxford Revolutionary Socialist Students'. I observed with detachment the internal Trotskyist debates over whether the USSR should be seen as a 'degenerate workers' state' or as a form of 'state capitalism'. In retrospect I was, like many people in the West, too inclined to attempt a would-be balanced assessment of the respective deficiencies of capitalism and state socialism and their respective hegemons.[1]

My only connection with Czechoslovakia was a short holiday trip in 1970 with two school-friends, driving from Budapest through Slovakia to Poland and back through Prague, where the pubs seemed curiously homely compared to the rather starker urban scene in Warsaw. We had seen Western newspapers here and there in Poland and there were none in Czechoslovakia, but we were anyway heading back to Munich and the UK.

Having begun a PhD at Sussex University with Tom Bottomore, I also began to teach Sociology and European Studies in 1973. Along my corridor were the Romanian exile Zevedei Barbu (Maci and Finkenthal 2015), Sergei Hackel, who combined teaching Russian with a role as a Russian Arch-priest, and Zdenek Kavan, teaching International Relations and still attached to the School of Global Studies at Sussex. Somewhere nearby was Eduard Goldstücker, whom I sometimes heard speaking Czech with Zdenek. I barely knew Goldstücker, but I was friendly with Zdenek and together we accompanied a group of Sussex students on a tour of EU institutions, Zdenek without a passport but carrying instead a stateless person's document. (He told me that later his brother countersigned his application for his new Czechoslovak passport.) In a seminar or conference paper Zdenek mapped out the cycle in the bloc between dissidence, reform, and repression – a cycle without any visible end. I remember asking someone from Czechoslovakia if Radovan Richta, whose book

[1] My colleague Julius Carlebach asked me in late 1989 what 'people like me' were going to do now. 'Business as usual', I replied.

Civilizace na rozcestí had impressed me, had survived the normalisation process, and was sadly told that he had accommodated to the new regime.

I must confess that I did not participate in the dissident scene or the peace movement, while supporting END (European Nuclear Disarmament) and other such initiatives. Other Sussex colleagues, notably Mary Kaldor and Barbara Einhorn, were of course active in these. By coincidence, though I did not know this at the time, Barbara and I were both in the GDR in April 1983. I had a very enjoyable visit to Leipzig on a British Council exchange, while Barbara, visiting peace movement activists, was imprisoned and deported. This banal reminiscence illustrates for me the knife-edge of life in an authoritarian state such as Czechoslovakia endured until 1989. I returned to Leipzig on the same programme in April 1988, by which time there was a strong sense that things were on the slide, with emigration more openly spoken about. I repaid the hospitality of my then guide, an enthusiastic supporter of the regime, by telling her that I thought the right to emigrate was a fundamental human right. On I went in a taxi to a party at the house of a social psychologist I had met by chance five years earlier. The driver brushed aside polite comments about how I was enjoying my stay and launched into a critique of the state of things. What about perestroika?, I asked. 'Wir wollen keine Perestroika', he replied. 'Dann würden wir Russen sein.'

In the 1980s I had began to work on political language in a comparative East-West context (Outhwaite 1986; 1989) and planned a book on the two German states with another Sussex colleague, the sociolinguist Ulrike Meinhof (only distantly related to the even more famous one). We quietly abandoned the book but I began to work more substantially on state socialism and its aftermath in the 1990s, including a book with Larry Ray (Outhwaite 1996; Outhwaite and Ray 2005).[2]

My retrospect on the Prague Spring is probably that of many Western observers. Like the reform efforts in 1956 and perestroika in the late 1980s, it showed, I think, the obstacles to, but not the impossibility of, 'socialism with a human face'. The Czechoslovak lesson was fairly clear that any change would have to come either in, or with the acquiescence of, the USSR. As my Swiss colleague said, it was 'the Russians' who invaded, even if the operation was technically a Warsaw Pact one, with the Germans kept in the background in order to avoid embarrassing parallels with 1938-9.

Apart from the dissident scene, the action then moved to Poland, where the 1968 opposition movement had attracted less attention; following the anti-Semitic pogrom there I came to know Zygmunt Bauman when he ended up in Leeds in 1972. Solidarność seemed to have better prospects, in a somewhat less repressive environment where opposition was more overt. Again, military rule in 1981, self-imposed to avoid a probable repetition of Czechoslovakia in 1968, showed the limits to endogenous reform.

The idea of market socialism continued to be an attractive one on both sides of the Iron Curtain. In the West at least, discussion tended to be somewhat divided between abstract philosophical programmes on the one hand and analyses which addressed the realities of

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[2]. At Sussex in late 1989 we were visited by a Chinese delegation, whose leader (and the only one who spoke English) seemed telepathic. Just as I was wondering if I dared ask about the implications for China of what had just happened in Europe, she fixed me with a firm stare and assured us that there were none. In some ways she was right. (See Tucker 2010)

introducing such reforms in communist Europe and their partial success in Hungary, Poland and Yugoslavia. Among the best was that by Alec Nove (1983). Around that time Bottomore introduced me to Zagorka Golubović, who pointed out firmly that we should not believe that Yugoslavia was so different from the other socialist states just because of the rhetoric of self-management and the fact that we could buy our usual newspapers there and pay with credit cards.

We shall never know, barring possible surprises from Cuba, whether democratisation and socialist economic organisation were compatible; North Korea will presumably reunify some time as unilaterally as Germany. Russia, after a brief semi-democratic interlude, has settled, like China, into a form of authoritarian state capitalism.

After 1989, my interest in the region, despite my inability to work in any post-communist language except German, was substantially driven by the challenge of the nearest thing to a macro-sociological experiment: the responses of a dozen very different societies, which had experienced a similar Ordnungspolitik, to what now seemed like an open future. The following decades continued to throw up surprises, of which the current authoritarian turn in Hungary and Poland is the most recent example. The separatist fragmentation of the region (including Russia), despite the tragic fate of Yugoslavia and Czecho-Slovak velvet divorce, has not been as dramatic as was widely expected.

The interplay of long-term causal tendencies and short-term accidents was something which Montesquieu addressed and makes him a crucial *étape*, to use Raymond Aron's term, in the development of sociological thought (Aron 1967). We can only guess how things would have been if Gorbachev had lasted no longer than his immediate predecessors. All attempts to construct generalisations about transition confront striking exceptions. The rule of thumb that the further east you are of Berlin or some such reference point, the worse your prospects, is belied by the Baltic states. The presence in the 1980s of a substantial private sector, which I remember an East German loyalist invoking as an explanation of the failure of socialism in Poland, turned out not to make so much difference after its fall. Conversely, we can still see some influence of nineteenth or early twentieth century borders on, for example, Polish electoral preferences between PO-land and PiS-land.

Sociology, I think, is better placed than other so-called disciplines to address complex situations such as this: travelling light, without pre-given assumptions and explanatory protocols. I continue to believe also that somewhere in the borderlands between social democracy and democratic socialism are the best prospects for the future of Europe and rest of the world.

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